

Lincoln and the Republican Party Interview Thread Transcript

Chris Bonner

The Republican Party was a paragon, I think in some ways, of this kind of moderate anti-slavery. Their concern was preventing the spread of slavery, the expansion of slavery into territories where it didn't exist. And their concern was really the ideology of free labor, the concept that free working men were the best, were the ideal citizens for the United States. And so Lincoln comes to be a sort of major figure, a major advocate for that free labor vision and for the Republican Party's brand of moderate anti-slavery because he's really conscious of finding the balance between pro-slavery, like a radical pro-slavery position, and a radical abolitionist position. He cultivates this idea of a future in which people are able to live freely in the North and continue to own slaves in the South if that's what they choose to do.

He cultivates this position in part because it's his conviction that that's what's legally required under the Constitution. There is no power in the federal government to end slavery where it already exists. And so what can be done is to try to ensure that states and new territories can limit the spread of slavery into new spaces. And so he strikes this really, I think really careful, moderate balance that makes it possible for him to come to prominence within the Republican Party.

Southern white response to Lincoln and the Republicans

The fears of white Southerners were represented in a lot of ways in the calling, or the naming of Lincoln and others as "Black Republicans," and this was a consciously racist claim. The fear that white Southerners were playing on was that the Republican Party was not anti-slavery as they said, but they were abolitionists, that they wanted the immediate end of slavery. And with that, or alongside the end of slavery, what white Southerners said was that Republicans and Lincoln wanted what was often called amalgamation. They wanted social equality, they wanted Black and white people to share the same spaces, to marry, to have sexual relationships, whatever that might entail. And so there's this anxiety that white Southerners were playing on that was trying to convince voters across the country that Lincoln and the Republicans wanted to eradicate the racial order. And Lincoln was insisting that his project was, again, to limit slavery where it existed, but white Southerners were trying to cultivate this image of Lincoln as not only an abolitionist, but what they would have called an amalgamationist.

One of the things that seems most important to me about Lincoln and really about the Republican Party of

Lincoln was this investment in the idea that a government should look out for vulnerable people. There is a way to think about Lincoln as just, like, freeing the slaves or to think about the Civil War as creating emancipation. But what really happens, and I think is fascinating in the Civil War era, is that the government and individuals together create this robust relationship between Black people and federal authorities. Black people are able to make their concerns heard, and federal government officials are listening to those concerns. And I think that the policy of, or the process of emancipation really reflects this relationship. Enslaved people run to the Union lines and say, "We want to be free." Generals like Benjamin Butler take in enslaved people and say, "They're 'contraband.' They can not be returned to our enemies."

Building on that, Congress enacts the confiscation acts, which say that the Union military cannot be used to return enslaved people to slave owners. Building on that, Lincoln enacts the Emancipation Proclamation. And so there's this combination of the efforts of federal lawmakers to listen to and respond to Black people's concerns and Black people making those concerns heard. The policies of emancipation, the greatest policies of Lincoln's presidency worked because the president was hearing the needs of people in need and responding to those needs. And so I think that it's really, really important that we see that the Civil War and emancipation worked because people in power cared about people who didn't have it.

Edward Ayers

So Lincoln is not an abolitionist because he does not think that what the abolitionists are calling for – which is the immediate beginning of the end of slavery – is sanctioned by the Constitution. That's why William Lloyd Garrison, leading abolitionist, calls the Constitution "a pact with the devil." Lincoln, because he reveres the Constitution, the Declaration of the United States, says "As much as I hate slavery, we cannot end it right now. What we can do is stop its spread so that it turns in upon itself. And so that as in the days, when the Constitution was written, when it looked as if slavery was going to disappear, because its markets had been destroyed because the land had been worn out, slavery will consume the South. It will consume that land. And so we would do better to end slavery by not acting rashly against it." So he would not have called himself an abolitionist because by this time the abolitionists had a very specific goal, which is the abolition of slavery where it was. Now, this of course, leaves Lincoln open to charges of being soft on

slavery. But from his point of view, "I'm being realistic. I'm doing what I can to stop it."

Lincoln makes two mistakes that we might think of in this regard. One, he overestimates white Southerners who do not own slaves. He's heard them. He's heard Henry Clay, his big hero, a slaveholder from Kentucky, extol the Union. He cannot believe that white Southerners don't love the United States enough to defend it when push comes to shove, when they have no explicit economic interest in defending slavery. So he believes longer than he might have that there's going to be an upsurge of support for the United States among nonslaveholding white Southerners. And even some slaveholding white Southerners, many of whom have been professed unionists only months before. So that's a miscalculation. He can't be blamed for that. He has too much faith in the people that his own origins trace to. He has origins in the white South and he believes that they believe what they have said before that they love the United States. You see, the United States military is dominated by Southerners who are fighting for the United States, are building their careers. People like Robert E. Lee are devoted to protecting the United States. He thinks that they will come to their senses, when push comes to shove, that they will choose the United States.

The other miscalculation he might make, which was common among Republicans is how strong slavery was in 1860. I find that people of lots of different political persuasions believe that slavery would have faded away had there not been the Civil War. But the fact is that slavery had never been stronger than it was in 1860. Its profits had never been greater. Its prices of enslaved people had never been higher. The problem was that precisely because it was so profitable, it was becoming concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. So the South was becoming ever more an oligarchy of white people. So those three fourths of white Southerners calculate this and they think, "Well, how are we ever going to have a future in this slave society? Only by being able to move to new cheap land, where we might be able to get a start."

So by underestimating how vital slavery was. And as you would see in Richmond, adapting to industrialization, into new kinds of crops and by overestimating white Southerners' loyalty to the Union, Lincoln thinks that the Republican plan of constraining slavery, having it slowly die, a strong impulse rise, that's what he envisions. But both those things fail.

Edward Ayers

Lincoln is a humane man, but he's not free from the racial prejudices of his time. He does not know what enslaved people will do in the moment of war. White Southerners say, "We know what they're going to do. They're going to protect us. They're going to stay here. They're going to be loyal to us." Of course, that becomes the story that they tell themselves for the next 150 years, right? Is that when

push comes to shove, they helped hide the silver. They stayed here with their loyal masters. That's what the white South believes. Lincoln doesn't think that's going to be the case because we have seen Black abolitionists come to the North – like Frederick Douglass – how articulate and powerful and determined they are.

He's seen thousands of people escaping through the Underground Railroad every year. People risking their lives to become free. He knows about Harriet Tubman. So he knows that those kinds of people exist. What's the proportion? Is the enslaved population of the Confederacy going to be of a greater assistance to the enemies of the United States, or could it be turned to advantage? And what Lincoln comes to realize is that the needs of the enslaved people and the needs of the United States Army are aligned. What do enslaved people want? They want an ally for the first times in their lives to have a place to go that is not dominated by slavery and to have a place perhaps where they would be able to get food and have a place where they were able to get clothing and have their children taken care of. What's the United States Army need? The United States Army needs information. It needs support. It needs labor, but it mainly needs to weaken the Confederacy. So in order to aid enslaved people, they are directly striking a blow at the material needs of the Confederacy, but also at the psychological needs of the Confederacy.

The Confederacy needs to believe that they are not fighting a war against the interest of enslaved people. But as they tell themselves, as impossible as this seems to us today, to protect enslaved people. What they tell them all the time is "The Yankees are not your friends. They are just using you. They will put you back in slavery somewhere else. Why not stay here? You've known us your whole life. We grew up together. We'd nursed you when you were sick, we provide you clothing. You'd want to stay with us. What do you think the Yankees are going to do? Why would the Yankees want you to be there?" Right? And so the argument that enslaved people had to make to the United States when they got there is that we're on your side. Where allies were invaluable. And by aiding us, you're hurting the enemy.

So Lincoln sees this, these words, these reports come up to Washington and he begins to realize that perhaps the way to do what he took office to do, which is to save the United States, goes through ending slavery, not around ending slavery. Now, what we need to understand is that Lincoln is up against a lot of people who disagree with that, including the Democrats who see this as a complete violation of what they signed up to fight for, which is to save the United States.

So here's how their argument goes: "So you're telling me, Mr. Lincoln, that you've drafted my sons to go down there in Virginia or Tennessee to fight. And you're going to prolong the war by expanding its purpose to end slavery? I believe you're acting in an unconstitutional way, no matter what you say, I believe this has been your

HANDOUT THREE, LESSON TWO

purpose all along. I believe the 'Black Republicans' have been abolitionists in disguise. I believe you're listening too much to people like Frederick Douglass and Thaddeus Stevens. Other people whispering in your ears that this is a chance to ennoble yourself. And here's what I want: I want this war to end and I want it to end as soon as possible. And I want my boys to come home and I want taxes to stop rising through the roof. Okay? And I want you to stop aggrandizing power. You are acting in a way that the founders did not envision, which is a tyrannical president absorbing all this authority to do things like declaring the Emancipation Proclamation." So those people have power. They have weight, and he can't afford for that argument to infiltrate the Republican ranks. He needs to remember, he wins 39.6% of the vote. That's a lot of people who didn't vote for him, right? So he has to find a language. That's not the language of abolitionism, but a language of practicality. So there's a famous line that the Emancipation Proclamation has "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading." That's on purpose. We know that Abraham Lincoln can evoke moral grandeur whenever he wants to, as he would do months later at Gettysburg. Right now, what he needs to do is show skeptics as well as supporters that there is a necessary embrace of the end of slavery to accomplish our purposes.

You might think that once the war begins that Lincoln would become radicalized. He would say all along, "I've never been radical." Maybe partly because there is a branch of his party called the Radicals, and he is not them. And they don't think he is them, right? They think they have to keep pushing him to act as boldly as he needs to. So what you find is that Lincoln at each step does what he thinks is necessary to try to stop the rebellion, right? And so I'd say he has one foot on the accelerator, one foot on the brake at all times, he's going to do what's necessary, but he's also not trying to overwhelm the South. If you told anybody at the beginning of the war that the United States army is going to mobilize enough force to conquer an area the size of continental Europe, nobody, especially the white South, maybe a lot of the white North, would have thought that was possible.

So now we look back on that and know, every textbook has the graph that shows how much more stuff the United States had than the Confederacy – how many more guns and men. But what the white South had was its home field advantage. It's defending a) it's home, which mobilizes people, but it's also an incredibly large, diverse, intractable terrain. So Lincoln could not have imagined that the United States would be able to mobilize enough people to overrun all of the Confederacy. What he was trying to do is get them to a point, over and over again, where they would negotiate a peace in which they would come back into the United States, but they would accept the non-expansion of slavery. Okay. So that's his strategy for a long time, until it proves that we're not going to defeat the Confederacy unless we destroy slavery. Okay. We're not going to save the United States without destroying slavery.

So he becomes radical in that sense, in believing that there has to be a conjoining of the two great purposes of the war. One which the Democrats see as directly at odds with each other. If you want to save the United States, give the Confederate states a reason to compromise and to come back in, stop sending our boys off to die when you could compromise out of this. The Radical Republicans say, "No, we've got to seize this moment to destroy slavery forever and wholly." Lincoln is thinking, "I want to stop the war, stop this suffering. Save the United States. It's not exactly clear what the ultimate fate of slavery might be. Right? But it is clear that we cannot allow the Confederates to keep using their enslaved population against us." So that's what he decides in 1862. And that's what becomes embodied in the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

People look at this and say, well, he had ulterior motives. All he wanted to do is to win, well, which is if that's all I wanted, that was fine too. But it's also the case that he recognizes that getting the reports from the field, look at the enslaved people and the chances they are taking to make themselves free. Three weeks after Virginia secedes, enslaved men go to Fort Monroe, near Norfolk and declare themselves on the side of the United States. Now think about this, Virginia has had slavery for over two centuries and it begins to unravel in three weeks. And this kind of placed every fear that white South has – is that we've been lying to ourselves, that our enslaved people love us, that we are like family, that they need us. At the first moment, people are going to the first allies, they can find United States Army to make themselves free.

So part of what Lincoln sees is that we have these powerful allies in the enslaved population who can be spies, who can tell us exactly which road to follow when we're mobilizing, who can help our own troops. Plus if we take them in, they will not be digging the entrenchments around Richmond anymore, that the Confederates will not be able to use them. So on one hand, the men in the field of the United States Army come to know Black people for the first time and to realize the moral purpose that they have to recognize the strength of their religious belief, to recognize the resilience of their families, and to recognize how much they understand what the war is about. So that infiltrates the Union cause. At the same time, the Union comes to understand 4 million people put to work against their will to support the Confederacy nullifies a large part of our advantage in manpower.

So I think that we have to understand both the aspirations of enslaved people who are making their possibilities known to the United States at the same time that Lincoln's coming to understand just how powerful Southern slavery is and what it means to be able to command people to do work that you are having to make soldiers do. You got some young white guy from Massachusetts digging a trench, the Confederates are having enslaved people do that, right? So you have to understand that all along, Lincoln's calculating all of this, right? And part of this is, is that he does grow to

understand the capacities of the enslaved people at the South in every dimension, both the capacity to save the United States, but also their own capacity for freedom. We imagine that Lincoln's growing over the war. He is because people like Frederick Douglass are coming to him and explaining, "Look, the first moment they can see a glimpse of freedom, they're risking their lives to seize it." And so I think you have to understand both the upsurge of possibility, but also the growing threat of the danger of concentrated in slave labor by the Confederacy.

Sidney Blumenthal

Lincoln says that when he heard of it, "We ran to the sound of the battle, carrying axes." And he had, of course been in the wilderness for years since his one term in the Congress, riding broken-down horses in the Central Illinois County Circuit with a traveling group of minstrel lawyers and judges, you know, sharing inns together and traveling from courthouse to courthouse. And he said, "I'd almost put politics out of my mind." Maybe. I don't think Lincoln ever put politics out of his mind, but suddenly he was born again. And these parties' names took on different implications. One was called the Opposition Party. One was called simply the Anti-Nebraska Party.

One party was organized out of a previous radical sect called the Republican Party. At Lincoln's great speech against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a small group of these radicals had approached him and asked him to come to their meeting for the formation of their party. And he said he had a previous legal engagement in a distant county. And he sort of ran away from them. And in 1856, Lincoln decides he's going to join forces with them. These parties organized state by state. They're not really organized nationally, and what becomes the Republican Party. And for the organizing committee of the Republican Party of Illinois, which takes place on Washington's birthday in Decatur, Illinois in 1856, Lincoln sends a telegram to his law partner William Henry Herndon, that he will go there. And according to Herndon, says, "Radicals and all." It almost breaks up over nativism because some of them, former nativists known as Know-Nothings, resist a platform plank that is inclusive of immigrants by a German newspaper editor. And the Germans are a very important part of this new party's coalition. And they turned to Lincoln to resolve it, and Lincoln says, "The answer's in the Declaration of Independence. All men are created equal," and they accept the plank.

Matthew Karp

I think this comes from Lincoln, and Lincoln was not alone among Republicans or among anti-slavery politicians in this sense. Torn between the ultimate goal of anti-slavery politics and the need to build a majority to achieve that goal. I mean, I think that's the foundational, in effect, strategic principle of the anti-slavery movement in the 1850s, it centers on this need to build a majority.

And the need to build a majority means finding that thread that can prescribe an anti-slavery solution that's constitutional, since the Constitution is something that is central to antebellum politics, and it's not just something that judges and lawyers argue about. It's something that the people argue about all the time. So putting anti-slavery in constitutional terms is really important. And in effect, finding an anti-slavery solution that can mobilize the vast majority of white Northerners is fundamental. Otherwise, anti-slavery may remain as radical as you please, but it will be irrelevant. And the goal is to move from radical activism to mass politics. And in fairness to the Republicans, even as critics like Frederick Douglass and other Black abolitionists lambasted Lincoln, and all the Republicans, for these kinds of compromises to Northern public opinion, at the same time, they often in some ways grudgingly, but powerfully, recognize the force of this kind of mass public opinion turn against slavery.

Even if the Republican program did not provide for the destruction of slavery in the way that Douglass would like to see it, Republican politics had transformed Northern opinion and made it much more conscious of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself, had made the future of slavery much less secure.

As Douglass said, when Lincoln was elected, "The power of slavery is broken and slaveholders know it." No amount of disclaimers and reassurances that Lincoln could make, would ever convince slaveholders, because they knew that Lincoln had been elected by a Northern public opinion that had been roused in wrath against the idea of the Slave Power and against the propagation of slavery itself.

I guess I would say some historians insist on Lincoln as a compromising figure and as a moderate, but I think that really gets the story wrong in the sense that, if you look at the Republican movement as a whole and what it did to upend decades of, in effect, pro-slavery politics in America, Lincoln was a moderate within the Republicans, but he was a moderate within a radical party that already had transformed the landscape of American politics and portended the destruction of slavery, well before the Civil War even began. As many Black abolitionists also recognized.

There's a woman, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, one of my favorite quotes from this period in the mid 1850s, even before Lincoln's elected. Mary Ann Shadd Cary was a free Black woman from Pennsylvania who moved to Canada and edited a newspaper for Black emigres to Canada. She was by no means an apologist for moderate politics. But what she says, "Instead of a handful of abolitionists, from motives of humanity, we see millions of abolitionists from motives of necessity."

That formulation, the switch, the transformation of anti-slavery from, in effect, a humanitarian movement of thousands into a mass political movement of millions is the radical transformation that the Republican Party achieves in the 1850s and that Lincoln symbolizes.

HANDOUT THREE, LESSON TWO

Let me dissent a little bit from the conventional view here. I think there's one reading of the story of the Civil War and emancipation and the story of Lincoln's path towards emancipation that says, "In the beginning, we went from a war to save the Union to a war to free the slaves, and slavery was pretty far down on the priority list when the war began, and then due to unforeseen circumstances, brought about by the tumult and chaos of the war, Lincoln was forced into accepting emancipation as the actual aim of the war. I think that's a little too neat, because the truth is the war had only been caused by Republican anti-slavery in the first place and by Lincoln and the Republican Party's unwillingness to back down on the question of slavery's future.

The Union that Lincoln was seeking to preserve, and the Union that Lincoln was willing to accept war in order to preserve, was a Union with slavery not part of its future. It was always an anti-slavery Union that Lincoln was fighting to save. Otherwise, he would have compromised on slavery from the get-go. I think it's a little bit of a false distinction to counterpose slavery and the Union in this fundamental way. Now, how would slavery meet its end? That remained uncertain. Yes, the war absolutely accelerated the path towards anti-slavery, but this is something that Republicans themselves also understood and foresaw.

Lincoln doesn't have any quotes exactly like this, but many members of his party warned in the summer of 1860, if the South secedes slavery will go out in blood. That if the South leaves the Union and there is an attempt to break apart the American nation, there will be a civil war and slavery will meet its end violently.

The South has a choice, either as William Seward says – Lincoln's Secretary of State had said many times in the 1850s – "Either the South can agree to make arrangements to end slavery peacefully and constitutionally, or the South can accept war and see slavery go out violently."

Lots of Republican politicians understood that when the war began, as I think Carl Schurz, who was an important Republican from Missouri, sorry, who was an important Republican from Wisconsin, said in a speech in St. Louis: Enslaved people will take matters into their own hands. The South cannot fight a war to preserve slavery while holding on to that institution on the ground. Schurz says, "Every slave cabin..." Sorry, I want to get this quote right, "Every plantation is an open wound, every slave cabin a sore."

Enslaved people will run to Union lines, will undermine the social fabric of the South – and this is already implicit in what the Civil War means, even from the beginning, even from before the first shots are fired. Now, it is true that Lincoln and the Republicans and some of the moderates and conservatives, because of his need to hold onto Kentucky, his need to hold onto the border states, his need to appease conservatives and Democrats in the North and to sustain the war effort, Lincoln is very cautious about the pace and the character and the rhetoric associated with this war of emancipation.

My understanding of the history is, right from the

beginning, this is conceived of as a possibility, and is in fact an inevitability, that right from the beginning, the weakening and ultimately the destruction of slavery is seen as concomitant with the Civil War. I would say that the war was fought to save the Union, but the war was fought to save an anti-slavery Union, and from the beginning there was an enormous disagreement within that anti-slavery Union about how radical and how rapid the progress toward anti-slavery would be. Frederick Douglass, radical abolitionists, and some radicals in Congress, Charles Sumner, Henry Wilson in Massachusetts, Thaddeus Stevens in Pennsylvania, and others urge Lincoln to pursue something like a war of emancipation nearly from the start. But the political calculus of the Civil War in the beginning is very fraught, because in order to sustain this victorious war against a formidably militarized South, Lincoln feels that he needs to retain the support of conservatives in the North and of, in particular, the border states, Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland.

That mediates against an embrace of a rapid war of emancipation. In order to retain Kentucky, which is a slaveholding state within the Union, Lincoln says, "We are not waging a remorseless revolutionary war," even though what's actually happening on the ground as early as 1861 in places like southeastern Virginia, is tens, hundreds of thousands of enslaved people are running to Union lines, are being proclaimed "contraband of war" by Union generals, and are in effect emancipated by the terms of the First Confiscation Act, which goes into effect in the middle of 1861.

In effect, emancipation is already happening on the ground at the edges, even if it's not rhetorically proclaimed by the Republican Party for political reasons. I think that's the dynamic that really characterizes the first year and a half of the war, is emancipation really starting to happen on the ground in quite large numbers by late 1861, as Union armies pour down the Mississippi River. In early 1862, when New Orleans falls, all of the enslaved people who come under Union control are, by and large, under the terms of the First and then the Second Confiscation Act, no longer enslaved. Their status is a bit uncertain and yes, Republican leaders and especially Republican conservatives refuse to rhetorically proclaim a war of emancipation, but that's already in effect what's happening.

Yes, radical abolitionists are very frustrated by this, and want Lincoln to own it and claim it and make it, write emancipation on, in effect, in heavy black ink, on the cover of every military proclamation. Lincoln refuses to do this because his own sense of the political tactics are different. By 1862, it's really clear that this is what's happening, and it's clear even in Lincoln's own mind that emancipation is becoming not just a military necessity, because in some ways it was always part of this military effort against the South, but an open embrace of emancipation and a kind of, in the form of a proclamation, or in the form of actual enticement of Southern slaves to cross enemy lines and join the Union Army, is necessary. And in some ways, that's what changes, not the meaning of the war, but the pace and the acceleration of that move toward anti-slavery.